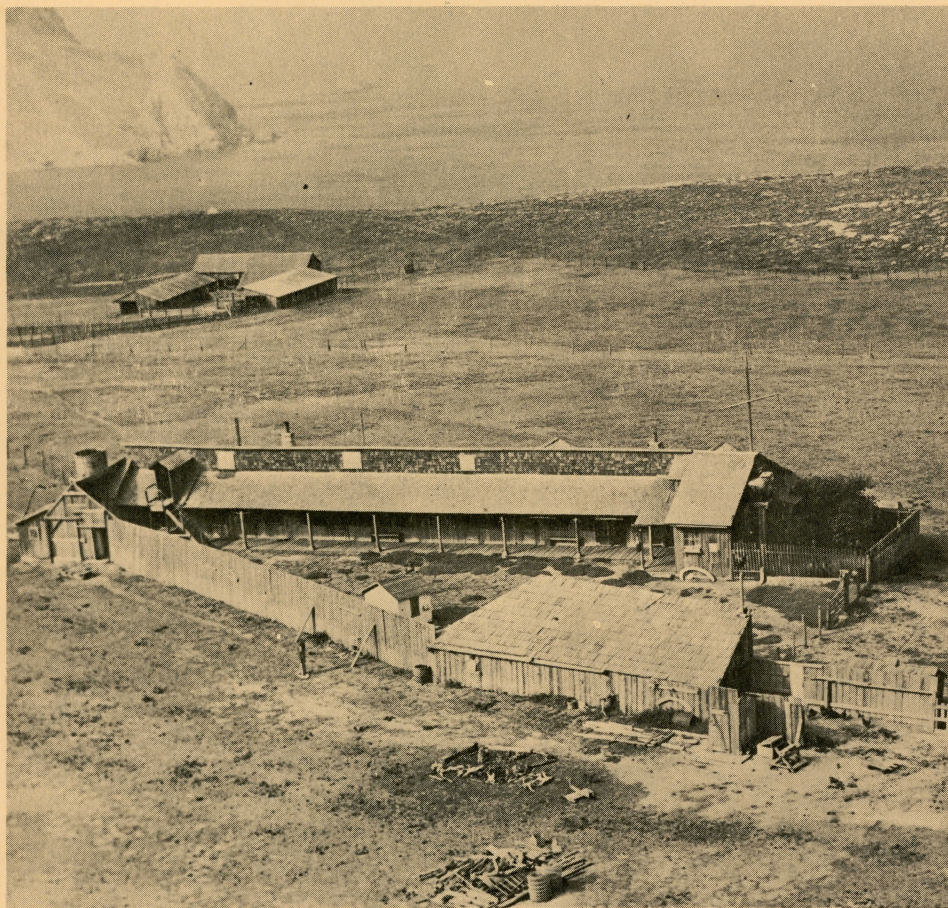
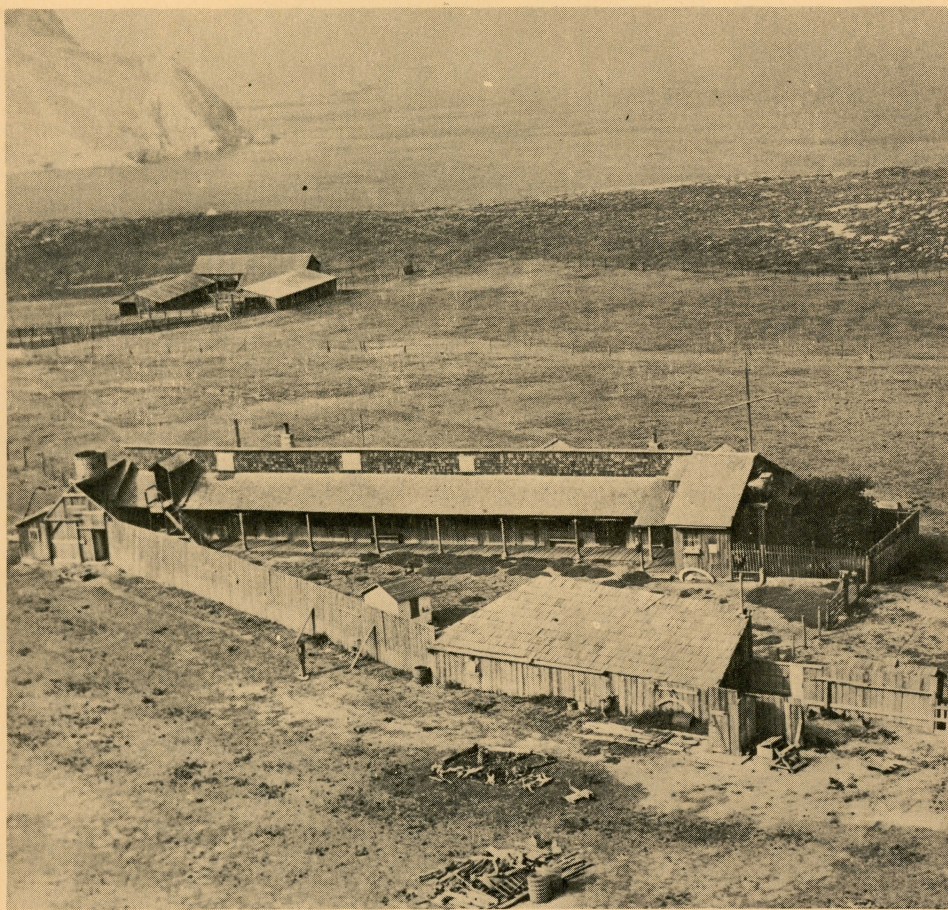


NOTICIAS



Barracks-like house John Russell built, with farm buildings and Cuyler's Harbor

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Random Notes on the Natural History of San Miguel Island

By CLIFTON F. SMITH*

For over forty years San Miguel Island has been in view from my house at Santa Barbara, about forty-five miles to the southwest. But with its low profile, one has to strain his eyes to see it, since much of the time the island is shrouded in fog or haze.

It is the farthest west of the local Channel Islands and thus the most maritime, about fourteen thousand acres of dunes, spectacular rocky cliffs, and a picturesque harbor with its own island of several acres. Off-shore near the west end are several oil seeps which someday might threaten its privacy.

But the climate has been a limiting factor. San Miguel is exposed to the open sea, with winds howling out of the northwest in spring and summer, and pity the poor sailor who gets caught in this dilemma. Shipwrecks are a testimony. It can also be a paradise in calm seas and gentle breezes after the fogs lift.

San Miguel Island was once inhabited by Indians, with villages concentrated along bluffs above an abundance of sea foods. It was later "discovered" by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo in October, 1542. And since then it has carved its niche in local history.

The animal population is perhaps normal for an island of this size and isolation. A dwarf mammoth once roamed in early times, apparently at one phase with the Indians, about twenty-five to fifty thousand years ago. This animal had originated as a larger species on the adjacent mainland and later became dwarfed by isolation, first reaching the Channel Islands (Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, San Miguel) while they were an extended peninsula of the Santa Monica Mountains. The geologic history of these islands is a fascinating study within itself, exhibiting continual sinking and rising, and creating many visible wave-cut terraces. Numerous birds are visitors or residents, with one subspecies limited to this island, the San Miguel Song Sparrow. Two mammals are also restricted, a deer mouse and the San Miguel Island Fox, a dwarfed subspecies of the mainland. With a little coaxing the fox becomes sociable and one often wonders how this animal had survived through heavy Indian habitation if they were not friendly toward it. In some coves six

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species of sea mammals (seals, sea lions) and the sea otter are making a comeback in surrounding waters.

And of particular interest to the writer are the plants of San Miguel Island. Many are endemic or known only on the islands, but most are common to the mainland, a few as remnants of a northern flora that extended south in Pleistocene times. Although there are no pines on the island today, as presently on Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa Islands, pine trees probably existed in the past when the climate was milder, as evidence reveals in the caliche sand casts which are exposed by the relentless winds in swaths across the dunes. The sands literally pour into the sea on the south side. Such erosion probably began after the introduction of sheep in the 1850s and was aggravated by the droughts of 1864 and later. Until 1950, when most of the grazing animals were removed, wind erosion has been a serious threat to the native habitats on San Miguel. But it can be said today that the scars are slowly healing, without the help of modern man and his range improvements, largely consisting of introduced grasses that violate the beautiful pristine vegetation.

In years of opportune rainfall, wildflowers can be very colorful, especially on the arrested dunes where the San Miguel Locoweed and the Dune Dandelion are abundant. About Cuylers Harbor are a reddish yarrow and a buckwheat, while cascading down steep sandy slopes are large colonies of the Island Morning-glory. On cliffs are succulents and the Sea Dahlia. And many annuals in open places, such as Tidy Tips and Gold Fields. Near the west end is a small colony of *Malva Real*, last collected at this locality in 1886, and lately rediscovered as the last plants of this species on the Northern Channel Islands. This shrub with hollyhock-like flowers, is frequently planted on our coastal mainland and about habitations on other nearby islands.

No ferns are known on this island. It is a land where potable water is scarce and the vegetation is favored by fog drip.

Recently, the National Park Service has taken on added responsibilities for the treasures of San Miguel Island, formerly managed by the United States Navy. We hope that the Park Service will protect this isle as a scientific reserve, with limited access to those who appreciate the natural environment of this gem in the western sea.